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CITIES AND TOWNS OF ALASKA*

ERIK R. v. KUEHNELT-LEDDIHN

THE growth of cities and the formation of their character can be observed best in regions only recently populated or colonized. The great distances in Alaska have helped to diversify the structure, function, and background of its towns: Ketchikan, the gateway, is as far away from Nome, the northwestern metropolis, as Savannah, Ga., is from Pierre, S. Dakota. Attu and Kiska are farther away from Anchorage than San Francisco and Santa Barbara are from St. Louis. There is no such thing as a "typical Alaskan town"; and although the social and human life of Alaska is as closely interwoven as that of an American city of forty thousand inhabitants, the white population of the Territory, the diversity of the larger places is remarkable. The illness of a trader in Shishmaref or Kotzebue will soon be known in Juneau or Cordova; the gossip of Fairbanks spreads to Dutch Harbor and Dawson, Y. T.; wages paid in the canneries of Kanakanak and Naknek will be discussed in Wrangell—yet Nome is as different from Fairbanks as Peoria from New Orleans; there is no similarity between Valdez and Point Barrow. The differences between the natives are also striking; even the Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida of the southeast have basically different cultures—one has only to compare Metlakahtla with Hydaburg or Klukwan—and between Aleuts, Eskimos, and Tinneh Indians there is, in spite of transitional racial types, an ethnological abyss. Nor are the Eskimos of, let us say, the Seward Peninsula, Bethel, and the Prince William Sound area, where a few survive, a homogeneous group.¹ Variety, not uniformity, is the keynote of the Territory.

THE GATEWAY: KETCHIKAN AND METLAKAHTLA

Ketchikan (population, 4695 in 1939; 3796 in 1929),² the most important town in the southern part of the Alaskan Panhandle, nicknamed for its mild climate the "Banana Belt," seems to be one of the most prosperous places in Alaska. Even the native quarters, on the other side of the fishing harbor, peopled by a mixture³ of Tsimshian and Tlingit, Filipinos and Hawaiians,⁴

* Report on a visit to Alaska in the summer of 1945.

¹ Cf. H. D. Anderson and W. C. Eells: *Alaska Natives: A Survey of Their Sociological and Educational Status*, Stanford University, Calif., 1935. Lavishly illustrated and well documented but restricted to Eskimos.

² Population figures are from the United States census. Estimates for 1945 are 20-70 per cent higher than the figures of the 1940 census (taken Oct. 1, 1939).

³ There is a certain amount of social discrimination against the natives throughout Alaska: the small communities of the northwest, with their scarcity of white women, are an exception. White-native

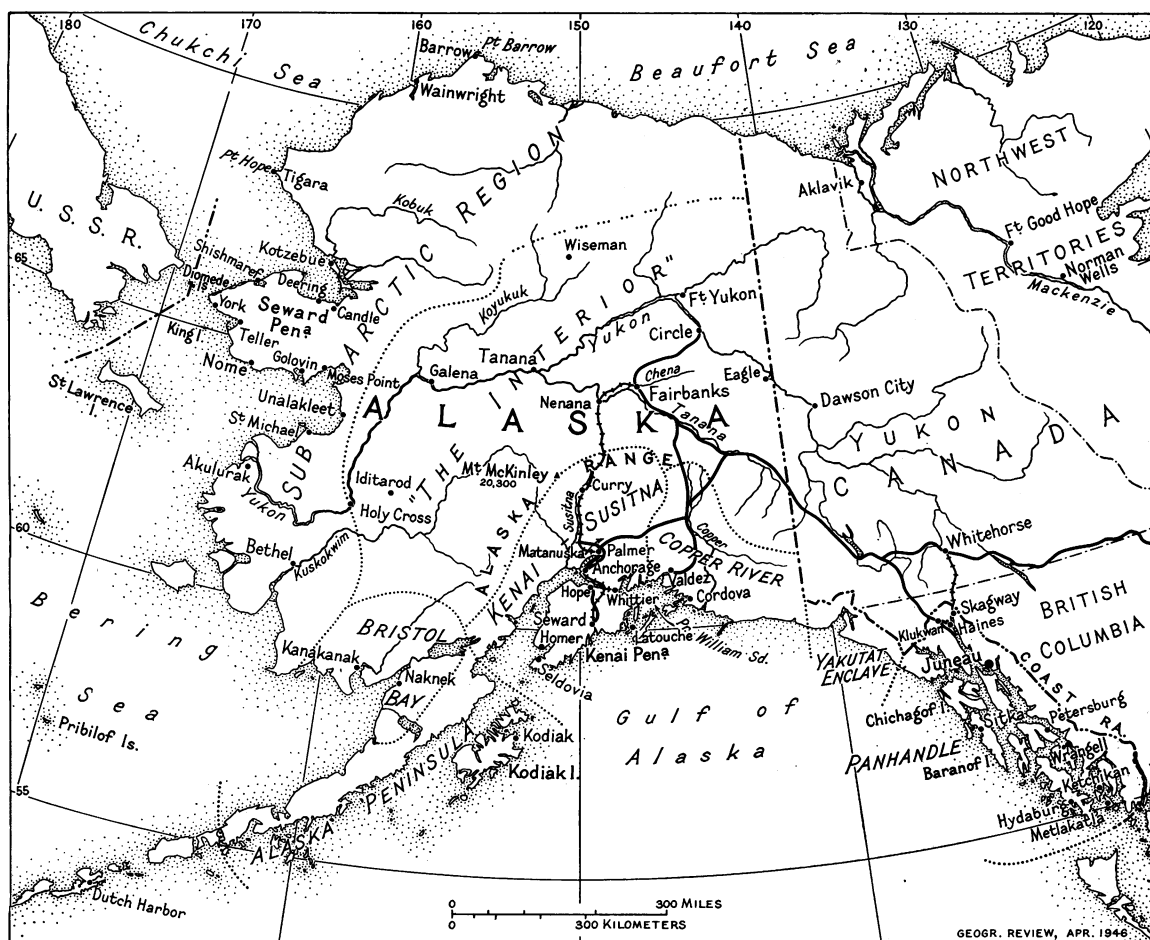


FIG. 1—Map of Alaska showing places mentioned in the text and a regional division of the Territory. The regions are composites based on various factors, principally climate, drainage, communications, vegetation. Thus the sub-Arctic region is determined mainly by climate and the mouths of the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers are included with it rather than with the Interior, primarily a drainage area. Climate and vegetation are important determinants in the Panhandle, accessibility too; communications and drainage in the Kenai-Susitna and Copper River regions. The Yakutat "enclave" is set apart by isolation and inaccessibility. The Bristol Bay region is distinctly a transitional area. The Alaska Peninsula and the Aleutians are obvious divisions.



FIG. 2—The dock at Cordova.

are free from the stigma of poverty. The streets and sidewalks are solidly planked; the shops with their window displays would do honor even to a larger city in the continental United States. The surprising number of books on the shelves of booksellers, stationers, and drugstores, as well as their quality, is typical not only for Ketchikan but also for the rest of Alaska; the Alaskans are North America's most avid and intelligent readers.



FIG. 3—Metlakatla, from the tower of Father Duncan's church.

Ketchikan stretches long and narrow, walled in by the steep mountains of Revillagigedo Island. The large fishing fleet is its main source of income; and besides fishing there is a certain amount of lumbering and the tourist trade. Ketchikan is also the northern terminus of the boats of the Canadian National Railways, and most Alaska-bound ships weigh anchor in its harbor. The most widely read Territorial monthly, the well edited *Alaska Sportsman*, whose interests include geographical, ethnological, and economic subjects, is published here. The Coast Guard headquarters of the 17th District are in the town, and the massiveness of the Federal Building bespeaks the metropolitan character of Ketchikan. Small planes of local companies and boats keep up the connection with numerous Alaskan and Canadian

intermarriage is rare. Filipino men, however, often marry Indian women. The Aleuts are mostly Greek Orthodox in religion and call themselves "Russians"; from intermarriage with Russian traders (*promyshlenniki*) they have some Russian blood.

⁴ According to the census of 1940, there were 403 Filipinos and 23 Hawaiians in Alaska, though to the visitor there seems to be a larger number of the latter in Ketchikan alone. The presence of the surprisingly large number of Filipinos highlights the fact that even so large a body of water as the Pacific may act as a uniting rather than a dividing ecological factor.

communities. Goods from "outside" are cheapest in Ketchikan. The Tongass Canal, on which the city is situated, is a real Golden Gate; and if we stretch our imaginations, we might call Ketchikan the Alaskan San Francisco.

Metlakahtla is an hour's trip by boat from Ketchikan. This almost solidly Indian (Tsimshian) cooperative village was formed originally by Father Duncan, an Anglican clergyman, in near-by British Columbia. Difficulties with the Canadian government and his own bishop decided him to transfer his Indian congregation in the 1880's to one of the few level sites along the Alaskan Inland Passage, and there he set up an independent Christian church. (There is now a Presbyterian church also.) It is interesting to compare this cooperative settlement with its less successful counterpart in the Matanuska Valley.⁵ Here a spiritual bond has effected a miracle of transformation; homes, stores, and churches that would compare favorably with those in many parts of the United States line the neat wooden sidewalks, and the cannery has become a model for all Alaska. Here, too, we have the assimilated American Indian at his best—a hard-working, prosperous, and abstinent citizen. An airfield near by used by Pan American Airways and also serving Ketchikan has put Metlakahtla on the communications map of this continent.

JUNEAU AND SITKA, OLD AND NEW CAPITALS

The Inland Passage is dotted with smaller and medium-sized communities serviced largely by the Northland Transportation Company and the Alaska Transportation Company, which, together with the Canadian Pacific boats, have their northern terminus in Juneau, Haines, or Skagway. Among these towns Petersburg (named after its American founder, Peter Buschmann) and Wrangell should be specially mentioned. Both places have the same economic background as Ketchikan and can boast of a large native minority. Juneau (5729 in 1939; 4043 in 1929) is different. The capital city, built, like Ketchikan, against a steep mountainside, owes its foundation to gold. Fishing and tourism are other sources of income, but the employees of the government and the mine and refinery constitute the bulk of the population, whose background is mostly Scandinavian and Finnish and Croat.⁶

⁵ Cf. "The Problem of Alaskan Development," U. S. Dept. of the Interior, 1939. Although cautious in its pronouncements on Matanuska, it gives unqualified praise to Metlakahtla. The paragraph (p. 35) of conclusions on successful settlement in Alaska derived from a comparison of Matanuska and Metlakahtla, too long to be quoted here, should be read and digested by all concerned with settlement problems.

⁶ The number of Serbo-Croats must have been still greater in the early 1900's, to judge from the inscriptions in the Juneau cemetery. It is difficult to understand why the southern Slavs in the New World have specialized so strongly in mining (Pittsburgh, Gallup, Butte, Anaconda).

The Native (Indian) Service and the Territorial government employ also a fair number of educated Indians. Here and in Douglas (522 in 1939; 593 in 1929), the "suburb" on the other side of the Gastineau Channel, the changeable fabric of Alaskan cosmopolitanism is best displayed.

The fact that Juneau is the capital stands out stronger than anything else. The city has not only its White House, the residence of the governor, but



FIG. 4—Juneau, looking across Gastineau Channel.

a score of offices directly under the control of the federal government. Juneau is thus a northern Albany and Washington rolled into one. Local politics are interlaced with national issues: the air lines to the Far East, financial arrangements with Canada, the citizenship of Filipinos, and Soviet foreign policy are everybody's business—not to overlook the burning question of statehood. Juneau may be small in size, but it is no provincial town. Its Museum houses ethnological and bibliophilic treasures of the first order,⁷ and its largest hotel, the Baranof, is the dream of the sourdoughs of the interior, who see in it the zenith of urban amenities and almost the *raison d'être* of the town itself. "If we only had a place like the Baranof!" is the constant sigh of all inhabitants of the mainland.

Here, below the 59th parallel, the winter temperatures are higher than in Portland, Maine. The rainfall, however, is much greater, contributing to the general impression of somberness that characterizes the fiords of the south-

⁷ An expression of gratitude must be inserted here to Mr. Edward Keithahn, director of the Territorial Museum and Library, for his assistance.

east, the most traveled part of Alaska. Geographically there are few features in common between the "mainland" and the Panhandle. The latter is essentially a maritime glaxis of British Columbia in foreign hands, and it is to be hoped that Juneau, at least, will in time be provided with a better connection with the interior over the Haines cutoff. The road leading from the capital over Auk Lake to Eagle River could be extended—admittedly at consider-



FIG. 5—The "Little White House," Juneau.

able cost—to a point opposite Haines on the Lynn Canal, whence a ferry service could be maintained to this already existing branch of the Alaska Highway and thus to Fairbanks. The relationship between the United States and Canada is fortunately such that the unnatural boundary between Alaska and Canada causes no friction.⁸ Inter-American traffic would probably move as unhindered over this suggested link as inter-Canadian traffic from Dawson and Whitehorse to the ports of British Columbia. However, it would not be a bad idea for Canada and the United States to interchange the Skagway region for the southwest corner of Yukon Territory. This would give to the Canadian Northwest a harbor and to Alaska an overland route from Nome to Juneau.

Sitka, the Alaskan Williamsburg, is slightly off the main maritime highway, but Yakutat with its canneries is frequently visited by boats of the

⁸ Because of the recession of the Grand Pacific Glacier in Reid Arm, Glacier Bay, Canadian territory reaches to the sea, thus bisecting Alaskan territory. See W. S. Cooper: The Problem of Glacier Bay, Alaska: A Study of Glacier Variations, *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 27, 1937, pp. 37-62.

Alaska Steamship Company, which services the mainland. The former Alaskan capital is accessible only from the sea, cut off from the rest of the continent by the largest glacier barrier in the world outside Greenland. The population of the town, predominantly native, nearly doubled between



FIG. 6—Valdez with its glacier background.

1929 and 1939 (1056 to 1987), almost entirely through the growth of the fishing villages on Baranof and Chichagof Islands, but no great development can be expected from this isolated spot.⁹

VALDEZ AND CORDOVA

A real stagnation is evident in various once-important places in the Prince William Sound area. Population decrease has been greatest in Latouche (40 in 1939; 339 in 1929), though, as with most other Alaskan centers, there has been a substantial if unmeasured increase since 1941. Cordova (938 in 1939; 980 in 1929) is far from being a ghost town, but the ties of the railroad to the Kennicott copper mines are rotting away, and rust gnaws at the metal grids for an airport dumped by the Army on the weed-covered station platforms—a reminder of Alaskan economic instability. The situation is not very different in Valdez (529 in 1939; 442 in 1929), seat of the

⁹ Including war premiums and transportation taxes, passenger fares on boats (medium first class) are higher per mile than plane fares in the United States. The trip from Ketchikan to Seattle, 750 miles, costs \$46.75; the run from Chicago to New York on United Airlines, 752 miles, costs \$38.85 ("Facts and Figures about the Coastal Air Route," Anchorage Chamber of Commerce, 1945, p. 13).

Third Judicial Division until replaced by Anchorage, though one would expect that the Richardson Highway, linking this port with Fairbanks and, more recently, with Anchorage and the Alaska Highway, would have brought new trade. But the business turnover in Alaska is never large except for the seasonal trade in salmon or the trade, frequently also seasonal, in gold. Neither Cordova nor Valdez has profited from Army installations such as those at Anchorage, Nome, Fairbanks, or Kodiak. In their struggle for survival Cordova and Valdez illustrate all the difficulties faced by Alaskan towns without direct or indirect federal aid. With their broad, dusty streets and their wide, plain, wooden houses that hide surprisingly well furnished and commodious interiors, they are indeed Alaskan in a sense that Juneau and Ketchikan, in spite of the use of the "Alaskan cow" (the ubiquitous can of condensed milk), are not. The presence of a few Prince William Sound Eskimos in the coastal zone is a further reminder that *this* is Alaska.

AGRICULTURAL CENTERS: KENAI AND MATANUSKA

Fifty miles northeast of Anchorage is Palmer, the miniature metropolis of the Matanuska Valley. The variety of vegetables, cereals, and fruit that can grow here is considerable.¹⁰ But the development of the cooperative communities of the valley has been hampered by occasional early frosts that destroyed the crops completely, and at the start the experiment was also handicapped by the human material. Cooperatives are a European (and Indian) rather than an American institution, and many of the earlier settlers went back to the States; others dissociated themselves from the cooperatives and established themselves in Palmer, across the railroad tracks, in a free, "capitalist" society. During the war both the "capitalists" and the "cooperators" profited highly from the nearness of Fort Richardson, which brought prosperity if not wealth to Matanuska. The future will show whether Palmer and the rest of the valley are going back to their bitter struggle of the prewar years or whether some gains of the profitable war years are here to stay.

The western half of the Kenai Peninsula includes some of the most promising agricultural land in Alaska, superior in quality to that of the Matanuska Valley—at least this seems to be the opinion of most people I have talked to. Of course, the Kenai and Matanuska areas contain but a

¹⁰ W. A. Rockie (A Picture of Matanuska, *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 32, 1942, pp. 353-371) enumerates, among others, artichokes, asparagus, broccoli, cauliflower, mustard, peas, tomatoes, oats, wheat, barley, and rye. Berries are plentiful, apples and pears are still in the experimental stage.

fraction of the agriculturally usable land of Alaska.¹¹ Seldovia increased its population only slightly in the decade before 1939 (from 379 to 410), but Homer, a new settlement starting from scratch, today has more than 500 inhabitants. Veterans have started a rush for homesteads in this region. Agricultural production could be substantially stepped up, and there is a ready market in Anchorage, but transportation facilities will have to be



FIG. 7.—The main street, Fourth Avenue, of Anchorage.

improved. There are two first-rate harbors on Kenai: Seward (949 in 1939; 835 in 1929), the original starting point of the Alaska Railroad; and Whittier, the new military installation on a bay open to Prince William Sound. A dead-end road leads from Seward to Turnagain Arm; and while the settlers of western Kenai clamor for a means of transportation to Anchorage, the business circles of that city favor the plan of a bridge over the shallow Turnagain Arm, thus linking up Seward, Homer, and Anchorage by road. At present there is only a railroad connection between Seward and Anchorage. Some circles in Anchorage favor a road to Whittier, which is nearer to

¹¹ C. C. Georgeson (The Possibilities of Agricultural Settlement in Alaska, in *Pioneer Settlement*, *Amer. Geogr. Soc. Special Publ. No. 14*, 1932, pp. 50–60, reference on p. 51) says that perhaps about 47,000 square miles may be considered as potential cropland and “a like area as grazing land.” Georg Sundborg (*Opportunity in Alaska*, New York, 1945, p. 78) speaks about 65,000 square miles for crops and 37,000 square miles of grazing area but admits that in 1939 there were only 3000 square miles of farmland and, of these, 12 square miles under cultivation. I fear that these estimates are optimistic. The definition of grazing land is necessarily elastic, especially in a sub-Arctic country. Since this article was set up in type a new estimate has been made by W. A. Rockie (see the record section of this number of the *Geogr. Rev.*).

the new metropolis; others have not given up the hope of seeing Anchorage provided with an efficient harbor, admittedly an expensive undertaking. The gravamen of almost all the Territory is the Alaska Railroad, owned and operated by the United States Department of the Interior, and the criticisms against it are as vocal in Anchorage, which owes its very existence to the railroad, as anywhere else.¹² The trip between Anchorage and Fairbanks

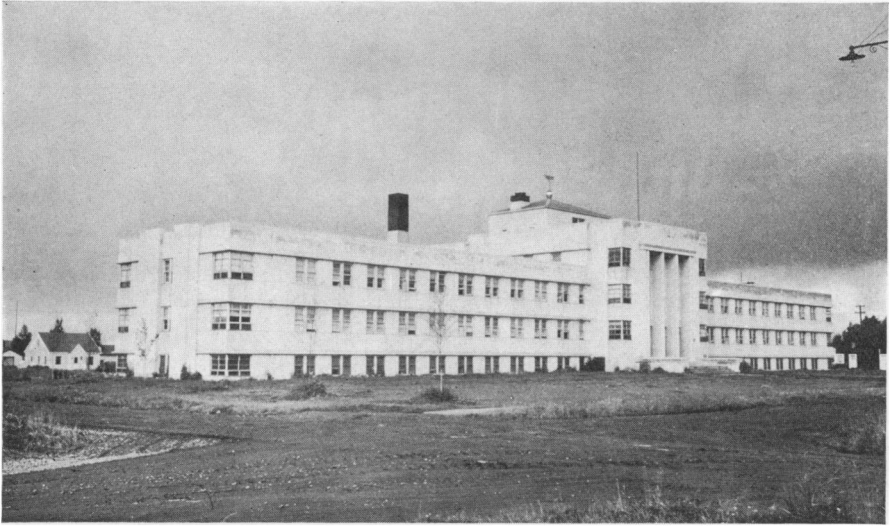


FIG. 8—Providence Hospital, Anchorage.

(280 miles; \$24 including tax) is made by train once a week only and takes two days, the night being spent in Curry. The fare to Seward (90 miles) is \$7.70, and the freight rates are correspondingly high. The local management of the Alaska Railroad can pride itself that the enterprise is a paying one. More recently, the airplane, the bus, and the truck have become serious competitors, without solving the basic problem of cheap haulage of freight from the interior to the coast and vice versa.¹³ An efficient harbor in Anchorage would substantially devalue the Anchorage-Seward section of the railroad and lower considerably the prices of imported goods.

In connection with the possibilities of increasing the agricultural output both in western Kenai and in the Matanuska Valley, it must be remembered

¹² Freight revenue increased from \$1,091,445 in 1935 to \$2,311,151 in 1940 and \$9,909,622 in 1944; the total amount of freight, from 109,000 tons to 194,000 and 627,000. The number of passengers carried increased from 29,510 in 1940 to 84,300 in 1944; the revenue deriving from passengers, from \$264,715 to \$473,219 ("Facts and Figures about the Coastal Air Route," *op. cit.* [see footnote 9], p. 14).

¹³ The Glen (Military) Highway, built during the war, links Anchorage with Valdez and Fairbanks by road. The Edgerton cutoff brings it nearer to the Alaska Highway.



FIG. 9.—Fairbanks. Bridge over the Chena River with Catholic church and hospital.

that the harvest could be only strictly seasonal. Fear has been voiced that the Seattle importers, working the year round, would insist on an uninterrupted purchase of their goods. One of the great Alaskan grievances has always been absentee capital and economic controls working from the “outside.”

ANCHORAGE RIDES THE WAVE

Anchorage, laid out in 1915 and boasting today a population nearing the 11,000 mark, is the largest city in the Territory, the New York of Alaska. It grew very rapidly during the war. The city itself is well planned; the streets are wide and the shops well stocked; building seems to have gone on throughout the war; and there is a general spirit of optimism and enterprise, though with a growing realization that the city will not be able to retain all gains made during the war. Much depends, naturally, on the continuance of the military establishments at Whittier and Fort Richardson. The agricultural areas of western Kenai and Matanuska are not far distant. The second-largest producing lode gold mines in Alaska are at Willow Creek near Anchorage, and there are two coal fields in the Matanuska-Chickaloon area, but still the fortunes of the city are tied up with those of the Territory as a whole: Anchorage rides the Alaskan wave, and except for its fortunate geographical location—fortunate if we disregard the shallowness of the Knik Arm—there are no important local resources in the immediate vicinity, save the ubiquitous canneries, to ensure an automatic increase in the city. In this respect and in the make-up of the population, largely of recent immigrants, Anchorage may be said to resemble New York.



FIG. 10—The main street of Fairbanks.

There is an enormous contrast between the openness, airiness, and casualness of Anchorage and the somberness and respectability of Juneau. Of local problems in Anchorage, drink—there are 62 liquor licenses in the city—and prostitution are outstanding. Both are to a certain extent concomitants of the military factor, but drink has always played a role in cold, northern countries, and prostitution is inseparable from a frontier civilization.¹⁴ Yet libraries, newspapers,¹⁵ schools, and other public institutions also thrive; interest in religion is not lacking; and the hospital at Anchorage is one of the finest in the Territory.¹⁶ The weather is drier than in the southeast, the Prince William Sound area, or even Seward. Anchorage is, in short, a coastal city without the depressing overabundance of precipitation that plagues most of the littoral. It is in about the same latitude as Oslo or Stockholm and enjoys the phenomenon of white nights in June and early July.

FAIRBANKS, THE "GOLDEN HEART"

On the other side of the Alaska Range is Fairbanks (3455 in 1939; 2101 in 1929), terminus of the Alaska Railroad and now also terminus of the Alaska and Steese Highways. In its riverine situation, on the Chena tribu-

¹⁴ According to the 1940 census, there were in the Territory, in 1939, 18,651 American-born white men and 11,733 women, 6944 foreign-born white men and only 1842 women.

¹⁵ The circulation of the *Anchorage Times* (daily) rose from 650 in 1935 to 1671 in 1940 and 6500 in 1945 (price 10 cents, the same as that of all other Alaskan papers except the *Nome Nugget*, 15 cents).

¹⁶ The white Catholic population of Alaska seems to be below the national average (i.e. about 12 per cent), yet the hospitals of Ketchikan, Juneau, Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Kodiak are owned and operated by Catholic orders.



FIG. 11 (left)—A flourishing potato patch on a silver-fox farm in the vicinity of Fairbanks.

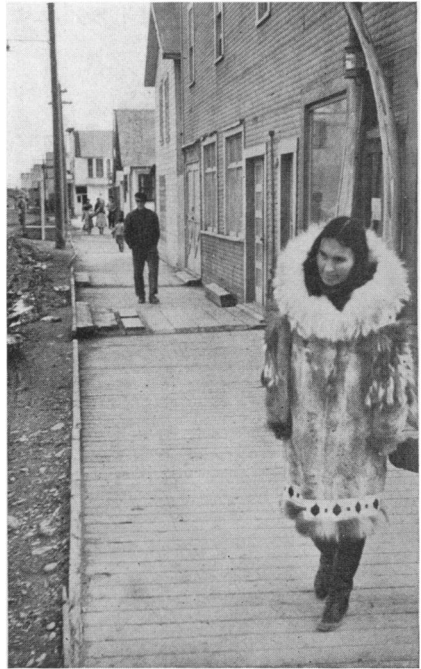


FIG. 12 (right)—Eskimo woman from Kotzebue on the main street of Nome.

tary of the Tanana, which in turn flows into the Yukon, the town is not so fortunate.¹⁷ Nenana, the terminal port of the Tanana-Yukon steamers, can be reached normally only by railroad, but Ladd Airfield, perhaps the finest in Alaska, is a certain compensation. Whether the Alaska Highway will bring a stream of tourists to Fairbanks remains to be seen. The population was higher in the gold-rush days than in 1939, and the gold mines in the vicinity still provide the main source of income, but it would be inexact to dub this Philadelphia-Boston of Alaska a mining town. It is the seat of the Fourth Judicial Division, having replaced Eagle, once important for its nearness to the Klondike, and is thus the unofficial capital of the Inland Empire.

Fairbanks is colder in winter and drier and hotter—sometimes the thermometer reaches 100°—in summer than the places we have been considering south of the Alaska Range. The vegetation does not have a tundra char-

¹⁷ A trader named Barnette wanted to establish a trading post at the junction of the Chena and Tanana but found another trader already there. He moved on and with his new post laid the foundation of Fairbanks, so called after a United States senator (see James Wickersham: *Old Yukon: Tales—Trails—and Trials*, Washington, 1938, p. 184).

acter, though muskeg abounds. The presence of college students obscures the fact that the Arctic Circle is not very far off, yet the shiplike shape of the Northern Commercial Company's large building and the Eskimos working on the railroad betray a sub-Arctic influence. Fairbanks and Anchorage are two worlds; here the sourdough¹⁸ prevails over the cheechako (tenderfoot), and a conservative aristocracy of old gold diggers with little fortunes buried in bank safes or mattresses sets a slower rhythm of life. It is in Fairbanks, and in points farther north and west, that we find the traditional Alaskan attitude of aloofness, balance, and detachment. The "outsider" may expect the pioneers of the Klondike, Fairbanks, Iditarod, and Nome to be a group of wild-eyed adventurers, but the fact is that the hard life has a sobering effect, and new ideas, ingenious plans, and rash investments are viewed with considerable suspicion on the other side of the Alaska Range.¹⁹ One cannot help being impressed by the spirit of Anchorage, but I personally value the judgment of "nonprogressive" Fairbanks more highly. Here we find buyers and traders coming from Fort Yukon, Circle, and the whole upper Koyukuk, upper Tanana, and upper Kuskokwim Valleys. Large and small air lines radiate in every direction.²⁰ If the vast majority of Alaska's population were not concentrated in the south and southeast, Fairbanks would be the ideal center of the Territory, but it is unlikely that the hegemony of Anchorage can be broken.

Farming offers certain possibilities in the Fairbanks region, and in the environs of the city are truck gardens growing a wide variety of vegetables. There are also a few farms in the central Tanana Valley, and I have seen there, in September, the largest and choicest vegetables. The real obstacle to the expansion of agriculture is the competition of the gold mines, which pay wages sufficiently high to lure farmers from their calling. Since placer mining, like farming, can be done only during the summer, seasonal division of labor is out of the question. Living costs here are even higher than elsewhere in expensive Alaska.²¹ The Tinneh Indians who live in the out-

¹⁸ On the earlier American settlers compare S. R. Tomkins: *Alaska: Promyshlennik and Sourdough*, Norman, 1945.

¹⁹ The picture of a mixed white-Eskimo community (Wiseman) has been well drawn by Robert Marshall in "Arctic Village," New York, 1933.

²⁰ The rates of the smaller companies seem exorbitant, but we must not forget that they engage in taxi flights almost entirely and often have no regular schedules. It costs \$200 to fly from Fairbanks to Point Barrow and \$75 to make the hop from Nome to St. Lawrence Island.

²¹ Sundborg (*op. cit.*, p. 29) tells us that a worker's family flat without heat and furniture which would cost \$29 in Washington, D. C., costs about \$16 in Seattle, \$25 in Cordova, \$37 in Ketchikan, \$40 in Anchorage, and \$50 in Sitka and Fairbanks and that living costs in the winter 1940-1941 were (index, Washington, D. C., \$100): Ketchikan, \$136; Juneau, \$149; Anchorage, \$189; Nome, \$209; Fairbanks, \$216 (p. 206).



FIG. 13—Federal Building, Nome. Note the tilt due to permafrost.

skirts of Fairbanks and up to the Yukon River seem to have less enthusiasm for the white man's work than the imported Eskimos, who also enjoy the white man's preference as human beings. The Tinnehs, who might be called Athabaskan cousins of the Navahos,²² share with them the aristocratic aloofness, dignity, and suspicion that most characterize the American Indian, whereas the Eskimos are frank, open, and "chummy."

UNFORGETTABLE NOME

To the tourist, Nome²³ seems to belie the statistics by being even more expensive than Fairbanks. A glass of milk costs 25 cents, a quart 65 cents; but it must be flown in from Anchorage, since there is no cow in the whole tundra-covered northwest. The only horse in the northwest, an exotic sight for far-traveled Eskimos, is the property of this truly sub-Arctic city. Here, at last, the tourist will find the Alaska he has been looking for. Nome (1559 in 1939; 1213 in 1929), which had a population of 12,000 in 1900 and is said to have numbered 30,000 at times, owes its existence to the gold found in the sand of the beach and in Anvil Creek. It is a grim and desolate place,

²² The Navahos call themselves *Dinneh*. The author knows several Navaho words, which were easily recognized by Tinnehs.

²³ It is generally supposed that the name of Nome (taken from Cape Nome) originated from a penciled notation on a crude map intended to read "? name." The printer, assuming that this meant "Cape Nome," incorporated it thus on the finished map. Another explanation lies in the Eskimo expression *Kinomi* (I don't understand). See E. S. Harrison: *Nome and Stewart Peninsula*, Seattle, 1905, p. 45. Nome appears for the first time on the Kellet chart of 1849 (*The Alaska Pioneer*, February, 1901, pp. 21-22). The town itself, named later after the Cape, was originally called Anvil City.



FIG. 14—Hotel Wallace, Nome, on a rainy day.

surrounded by the rusty-red tundra, devastated repeatedly by fire and buffeted by the stormy gray waters of Bering Sea. Yet the town undeniably has character and a unique interest. Slightly more than half of the population is Eskimo. Nome, although one might call it the Alaskan Seattle, has an inferior harbor. Incoming boats are forced to lay anchor several miles offshore, and it has been asserted that goods shipped from Seattle in summer involve freight rates which are evenly split between the shipping and the loading companies.

Nome is the seat of the Second Judicial Division and the nerve center of the Seward Peninsula (27,000 square miles), the Yukon delta, and the whole northwest (130,000 square miles). Places that trade through Nome are Unalakleet, St. Michael, York, Wales, Golovin, Teller, Deering, Candle, Shishmaref, Kotzebue, Point Hope, Wainwright, Little Diomed Island, St. Lawrence Island, King Island, and the Kobuk Valley. Point Barrow²⁴ seems to gravitate more and more toward the Fairbanks orbit. In winter ice cuts Nome off from the rest of the world except by air. There are still two or three dog teams in the city, but the airplane is rapidly supplanting this classic, but never cheap, means of transportation—good mulemutes are expensive, and so is their food. The tracks of a railroad leading from

²⁴ The Wien Air Company is building a small hotel in Point Barrow, which is the center of a Naval Reserve oil field. The transportation problem in connection with the exploitation of the oil fields is considerable; Barrow and Point Hope are ice-free only a few weeks in the year and there is considerable variation from year to year in the dates of opening and closing of the navigation period.

Nome past Anvil Mountain to the heart of the Seward Peninsula have not yet been removed, but they are used only occasionally.²⁵

Most of the houses of Nome are of a relatively light, wooden construction, many of them, especially those owned by Eskimos, nothing but shacks. There has been a considerable reluctance on the part of the old-timers to set up more sumptuous homes, the excuse being always that they would return to the States "any time"—which threat they never carry out, because there simply is no other place like Nome. They might as well start building! Heavier structures encounter the problem of permafrost,²⁶ a problem not entirely solved by the architects of the Federal Building. An expensive defrosting of the frozen layers must first be effected; otherwise, solid buildings erected during the summer and heated in the winter might melt the frozen-earth foundation, with resultant sinking and tilting (Fig. 13). The alternative is digging the foundation in installments, but the short building season makes this difficult. The last ice and snow disappear in early June, and snow can be expected again by mid-September.

The war brought substantial gain to Nome from the military installations near by, which were, as in the case of Fairbanks, partly Soviet Russian (on a lend-lease basis). The survival of these camps and airports is a matter of great importance to local business. Another wartime phenomenon was the influx of Eskimo women from the small settlements along the coast; since their husbands had been drafted and shops are nonexistent in the smaller communities, their cash allowance from the government was of no value in their normal places of residence. The drafting of able-bodied and healthy (i.e. nontubercular) Eskimos was a blow to a people that already had suffered great losses through the intrusion of the white man, bringer of drink and disease.²⁷ Moreover, the fact that the inferior elements of white society associate with the Eskimos, a most charming, uncannily intelligent,²⁸

²⁵ Once there were rumors that the Canadian Pacific would build a railroad via Dawson, Fairbanks, and Nulato to Nome. See H. L. French and M. D. Montross: *Nome Nuggets*, New York, 1901. This volume contains interesting accounts of social life in early Nome and also a description of the great storm on September 12, 1901.

²⁶ Stephen Taber: *Perennially Frozen Ground in Alaska: Its Origin and History*, *Bull. Geol. Soc. of America*, Vol. 54, 1943, pp. 1433-1548. A great deal of successful research in building on permafrost has been done by Soviet geologists and engineers; see the publications of the V. A. Obrutchev Institute for the Study of Permafrost (Institut Myerzlotovyedyeniya im. V. A. Obrutcheva). It was founded by the late M. I. Sumgin. Its works are published (irregularly) by the Academy of Science of the USSR (Moscow and Leningrad).

²⁷ The Danish government prohibits tourism and white settlement and exploitation (with the exception of the cryolite mine in Ivigtut) in Greenland, a radical but salutary measure for the protection of the natives.

²⁸ We were approached by an Eskimo GI who asked about the meaning of articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Magazine*; he did not understand them, but he was able to quote long paragraphs

and artistically gifted tribe, inciting them to excessive drink²⁹ and immorality, worsens the situation.

The Eskimo population of Nome is swollen in the summer by the arrival of the King Islanders, led by their chief and their priest, a science scholar from the Sorbonne. These natives work from June to September as longshoremen—work for which they have a special aptitude—and engage



FIG. 15—Children of King Islanders in their summer quarters east of Nome.

also in ivory carving. The fact that for most of the year they are out of contact with the white world is an advantage. Their economic situation is good: they sell at high prices the surplus of the pelts and furs (seal, great seal or oogrook, beluga, sea lion, polar bear, walrus) bagged during the winter; jewelry from walrus tusks and fossil ivory also has a good market.

Reindeer herding around Nome and in the rest of the northwest has not been the success it is supposed to be. The best pasturage is inland, but the coastal Eskimo has an instinctive dislike of being away from the sea. The Eskimo is, in fact, the complete opposite of the Lapp, who, often living near the sea, remains a complete stranger to salt water; whereas the coastal Eskimo lives off the seal, the Lapp lives off the reindeer. The Presidential act of 1937 that reserved reindeer herding for the natives was thus a heavy blow

verbatim—the product of a civilization that has to rely on memory because knowledge cannot be kept “on file.”

²⁹ In contrast with the continental United States, Alaska has no law prohibiting the sale of alcoholic drinks to natives.

to the industry.³⁰ The drafting of the Eskimo herders finally resulted in wholesale extermination of the reindeer herds by wolf packs.

Nome is the terminus of the Pan American clippers, which make the run from Seattle via Fairbanks in 18 to 20 hours. Alaska Airlines connects Nome with Anchorage, and various smaller lines assure transportation to the settlements near by. Whether Nome will be an important center of air communication remains to be seen. It looks as if Asia-bound air routes were going to be located in more southern latitudes, probably from Chicago³¹ over Edmonton, Juneau, Anchorage, and the Aleutians. Siberia, 30 minutes by plane from Nome, is a modern Tibet as regards seclusion, and the nonfraternization policy imposed on the Soviet forces in Alaska has not encouraged the hope that Bering Strait will become a major bridge of communication in the near future. There is an invisible wall between the Diomedes, as well as between the Aleutian and Commander Islands, which can be eliminated only by greater amity and understanding. A letter posted in Little Diomed Island for an addressee in Big Diomed, 5 miles away, would have to be routed via Nome, Seattle, New York, France, Moscow, and Irkutsk. The future of Nome depends to a great extent on the answer to the question whether the Seward Peninsula will be a bridgehead or a cul-de-sac. Meantime there are other prospects for Nome besides traffic and gold mining—native arts and crafts. Properly organized, Nome could become an export center for native products, which ought to have a good market in the United States. The establishment of a native workshop for such fur garments as parkas, mukluks, and gloves by the United States Indian Service, which for all practical purposes here is an Eskimo service, is certainly a step in the right direction in fostering and conserving a truly American art and solving at the same time part of the economic problem of the natives.³²

THE FUTURE OF ALASKA

Something should be said about the future and prospects of the Territory as a whole, since the fate of all its towns is to a varying degree dependent

³⁰ Besides the reindeer, the bison has also been introduced into Alaska (central Tanana Valley). Musk oxen for experimental use were brought to Fairbanks from Greenland. See W. B. Bell: Experiments in Re-establishment of Musk-Oxen in Alaska, *Journ. of Mammalogy*, Vol. 12, 1931, pp. 292-297.

³¹ Opinion in Alaska is divided as to whether Chicago or Seattle should become the United States anchor of the aerial Orient Line. Business groups dependent on Seattle are strongly in favor of that city, but disinterested observers would not mind if the monopoly of Seattle in Alaskan commerce were somewhat limited by Midwestern or Eastern competition. Alaska would profit from a freer trade.

³² Eskimo-made parkas cost 50 to 80 per cent more in southern Alaska than in Nome, and in Seattle their price is doubled. They would make an excellent garment for the cold winters of the American Northeast and Middle West.

thereon. So much has been written about the unlimited possibilities of the Golden North that a word of sober analysis is not misplaced.³³ An inventory of Alaskan resources and their potential profitable exploitation puts in the first order of importance fishing (salmon) and canning.³⁴ This is a seasonal enterprise; the workers engaged in it return after their employment of two or three months to the States, where they spend most of their savings.³⁵ The capital comes from either Seattle or New England, and the dividends flow in the same directions. Mining is industry number two; during the war gold mining was virtually at a standstill, and much of it depends on the uncertainties of a fiscal policy. There is a fair amount of coal in the Territory (some of it mined) but no large mechanized industry. Even if the hopes for iron ores materialize, it is difficult to see how an industry so far away from the bulk of its customers can be profitable. Considerable oil deposits have already been discovered in northern Alaska, and more may be discovered. If we bear in mind how much money and time were spent by large companies in investigating the oil fields of the Netherlands Indies and putting them into production, we shall reserve our judgment. If high-grade oil should be found near the south coast, commercial exploitation would be more promising than the problematic enterprise at Norman in the lower Mackenzie Valley.

A cautious attitude should be taken as regards the prospects of farming; the Matanuska Valley experiment has taught us a pertinent lesson. Besides the inherent difficulties, the high wages paid to industrial workers are a constant temptation to the farm worker not fanatically attached to his calling. There is also the problem of absenteeism, which is a constant economic drain on the Territory.³⁶

Tourism, although certainly increasing in volume, will hardly become a dominant factor in Alaskan economy. Large-scale excursions to Alaska require more than the usual short vacation time. The round trip from Seattle to Seward alone takes 12-14 days by steamship, and it remains to be seen whether the much-heralded air age is going to remedy the situation

³³ Alfred H. Brooks's dream of 10 million Alaskans seems far from realization (*The Value of Alaska*, *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 15, 1925, pp. 25-50; *The Future of Alaska*, *Annals Assn. of Amer. Geogrs.*, Vol. 15, 1925, pp. 163-179).

³⁴ In 1941 fish products were the most important article of export (\$57,000,000), followed by gold and silver (\$18,000,000) and furs and skins (\$4,300,000). To the first item, fish products other than canned and frozen fish should be added (\$2,300,000), which otherwise would take fourth place in export statistics. See "Facts and Figures about the Coastal Air Route" (*op. cit.*), p. 11.

³⁵ In 1943, 23,711 persons were engaged in the Alaskan fishing industry. See W. T. Bower: *Alaska Fishing and Fur Seal Industry*, Report for 1943, *U. S. Dept. of the Interior Digest No. 10*, 1944.

³⁶ See the *Annual Report of the Governor of Alaska to the Secretary of the Interior, Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1941*, pp. 3-5.

sufficiently to attract the general run of tourists. Nor, even if the Alaska Highway is maintained, is it likely to bring a stream of nature lovers to the North; here again, the distances involved are too great.

Alaska is still a young territory, and only careful, long-range investments on a large scale, patience, selective immigration,³⁷ good roads, cheaper transportation, improved living conditions in isolated places, and husbanding of the natural resources³⁸ will bring further growth and well-being. Alaska's importance for international air communications is undeniable, but it is hard to imagine how a country one-fifth the size of the continental United States could achieve sudden prosperity by the addition of a few thousand airport employees and mechanics. There are no short cuts to a brilliant future for the Territory. The Golden North is not the Golden West. Only a balanced view of Alaskan affairs, a better understanding of Alaskan problems in Washington, and a gradual building and rebuilding of this highly complex and varied part of the nation will spell success. It is obvious that there are also psychological obstacles to the colonization of Alaska; it would be foolish to pretend that the American of 1945 has the same qualities as his ancestor of a hundred years ago. He is not less virtuous or capable than the American of 1845, but his virtues and abilities are different. Nevertheless, the older American traditions are not yet dead.

On my flight to Nome from Galena, on the Yukon, we made a landing at Moses Point, on Norton Sound. It was in the early hours of the morning, and the tundra offered a picture of utter desolation. One might have been beholding the earth immediately after the recession of the flood; no tree, no bush was visible, only brown morass and gray puddle. The cold rain was beating mercilessly around a solitary light tower. But when the door of the plane was opened, we saw a young woman, perhaps the postmistress, running toward us with a heavy sack over her shoulder; it was an ungodly hour, and a gloomier stop and fouler weather could hardly be imagined, but, in the words of Robert W. Service, the bard of the Yukon, she "wore a smile you could see a mile." The laughter and merriness of this one human being represent the spirit of the real Alaska and are perhaps the sole foundation for a greater Alaskan future to be built on simple virtues—courage, industry, and prudence.

³⁷ Governor Ernest Gruening has recently (*New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1945) again warned prospective immigrants. President Roosevelt's speech at Bremerton in 1944 dealing with the opportunities of Alaska was undoubtedly too optimistic.

³⁸ One of the grievances of the Territory is federal ownership of important resources and large areas in Alaska. Whether or not the alternative to this evil would be wasteful exploitation it is difficult to judge.